

Message Text

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ACTION EUR-12

INFO OCT-01 ISO-00 CIAE-00 DODE-00 PM-05 H-01 INR-10
L-03 NSAE-00 NSC-05 PA-01 SP-02 SS-15 USIA-06
COME-00 EB-08 LAB-04 SIL-01 TRSE-00 HA-05 /079 W
-----077535 011855Z /42

P 011835Z MAR 78
FM AMEMBASSY LONDON
TO SECSTATE WASHDC PRIORITY 3694
INFO AMCONSUL BELFAST
AMCONSUL EDINBURGH

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E.O. 11652: N/A
TAGS: PINT, PGOV, UK
SUBJECT: ILFORD NORTH BY-ELECTION

REF: LONDON 2574

SUMMARY - THE CONSERVATIVES ARE EXPECTED TO REGAIN THE ILFORD NORTH SEAT VACATED BY THE DEATH OF THE INCUMBENT LABOR MP. SUCH A RESULT WOULD GIVE THEM A PSYCHOLOGICAL BOOST IN WHAT IS GENERALLY ASSUMED TO BE AN ELECTION YEAR, AND ENHANCE MRS. THATCHER'S REPUTATION AS A POLITICAL TACTICIAN. BUT MORE IMPORTANT THAN THE EVENTUAL RESULT ARE THE ANTICIPATED INSIGHTS INTO THE IMMIGRATION/RACE ISSUE, THE DISPOSITION OF TRADITIONAL LIBERAL SUPPORT AND VOTER ATTITUDES THIS BY-ELECTION SHOULD YIELD. THE FINAL ELECTION DATA SHOULD PROVIDE A LOT OF GRIST FOR THE ANALYTICAL MILLS. END SUM

1. THE MARCH 2 ILFORD NORTH BY-ELECTION (REFTEL) HAS ATTRACTED A TOTAL OF SEVEN CANDIDATES (ONE FRINGE CANDIDATE WITHDREW AFTER IT WAS DISCLOSED HE WAS FACING CHILD MOLESTATION CHARGES). IN ADDITION TO THE TWO MAJOR
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PARTY CANDIDATES -- TESSA JOWELL FOR LABOR AND VIVIAN BENDALL FOR THE CONSERVATIVES -- THE LIBERAL PARTY, THE NATIONAL FRONT (NF), THE FORMER TORY MP, AN EXTREME LEFT-WINGER (REPRESENTING THE EAST LONDONPEOPLE'S FRONT) AND A SELF-PROCLAIMED "WHITE CITIZENS" CANDIDATE ARE STANDING FOR ELECTION TO REPLACE LABOR MP MILLIE MILLER. THE SYMBOLIC IMPORTANCE OF THIS BY-ELECTION IS

FAR GREATER THAN THE POLITICAL SIGNIFICANCE OF A SINGLE PARLIAMENTARY SEAT. IF LABOR SHOULD RETAIN THE SEAT -- AND THAT SEEKS UNLIKELY DESPITE A VERY DETERMINED EFFORT TO DO SO -- CALLAGHAN COULD CLAIM VINDICATION FOR HIS POLICIES, AND LABOR PARTY MORALE WOULD BE GREATLY ENHANCED. THE RECAPTURE OF A SEAT HELD BY THE CONSERVATIVES FOR 20 YEARS PRIOR TO OCTOBER 1974 IS ALSO OF CONSIDERABLE SYMBOLIC SIGNIFICANCE TO MRS. THATCHER AND HER SUPPORTERS. BUT EVEN MORE IMPORTANT, THIS ELECTION PROVIDES THE FIRST ELECTORAL TEST OF HER RECENT DECISION TO STRESS THE IMMIGRATION ISSUE. A TORY WIN IN ILFORD NORTH -- ESPECIALLY A BIG ONE -- WOULD SEEMINGLY DEMONSTRATE THE ACUITY OF HER TACTICAL JUDGEMENT AND ENSURE THAT IMMIGRATION AND ITS SILENT PARTNER, RACISM, BECOME MAJOR ISSUES IN THE NEXT GENERAL ELECTION.

2. THE RESULTS OF THE ILFORD NORTH BY-ELECTION ARE ALSO EXPECTED TO PROVIDE PARTIAL ANSWERS TO A NUMBER OF KEY POLITICAL IMPOUNDERABLES WHICH COULD BE PIVOTAL IN THE NEXT GENERAL ELECTION: THE EXTENT OF THE DECLINE IN THE LIBERAL VOTE; HOW IT WILL BE DISTRIBUTED AMONG THE OTHER PARTIES; THE DRAWING POWER OF THE NF NOW THAT THE TORIES HAVE GRASPED THE ANTI-IMMIGRATION BANNER; AND WHOSE ELECTORAL OX IS LIKELY TO BE GORED BY THE NF.

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3. EMBOFFS VISITED THE CONSTITUENCY FEBRUARY 28, MEETING WITH THE LABOR CANDIDATE AND LOCAL WORKERS, ACCOMPANYING LABOR MPS CANVASSING VOTERS AND ATTENDING LABOR'S WIND-UP RALLY. THE IMPRESSIONS GAINED, WHILE BY NO MEANS BALANCED, DID PROVIDE SOME INTERESTING AND USEFUL INSIGHTS INTO THE NATURE OF THE CAMPAIGN AND VOTER ATTITUDES. THE MOST SIGNIFICANT OF THESE IMPRESSIONS ARE DISCUSSED BELOW:

-- IMMIGRATION AND RACE - THE IMMIGRATION ISSUE HAS DOMINATED THE PUBLIC DEBATE IN ILFORD NORTH. MRS. THATCHER'S EARLIER REMARKS ON IMMIGRATION SURFACED THE ISSUE, AND LABOR'S SOMETIMES FRENETIC ATTEMPTS TO SCOTCH IT ONLY underscored ITS PLACE IN THE CAMPAIGN. THE MEDIA HAVE BEEN WILLING COLLABORATORS, HIGHLIGHTING THE CHARGES AND COUNTER-CHARGES EMANATING FROM PROMINENT POLITICAL FIGURES. THE NF SOUGHT TO EXPLOIT LATENT RACIST FEELINGS BY SCHEDULING A PROVOCATIVE DEMONSTRATION IN THE CONSTITUENCY, BUT BECAME THE OBJECT OF THE MOST IMPORTANT BAN ON PUBLIC DEMONSTRATIONS IN 30 YEARS. AND THE OTHER CANDIDATES HAVE ECHOED THE RHETORIC OF THE PRINCIPAL PLAYERS, OFTEN IN SPADES. CONSEQUENTLY, THE CAMPAIGN HAS PROBABLY BEEN THE MOST EMOTIONAL,

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TRSE-00 COME-00 EB-08 LAB-04 SIL-01 HA-05 /079 W

-----077551 011855Z /40

P 011835Z MAR 78

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AND CERTAINLY THE LEAST ATTRACTIVE, FOUGHT IN THE UK FOR MANY YEARS. WHILE THE ACTIVITIES OF THE NF NO DOUBT REPRESENT A POLITICAL NADIR IN BRITISH POLITICS, MANY OBSERVERS BELIEVE SIR KEITH JOSEPH'S FEBRUARY 25 ATTEMPT TO COUNTER FEARS THAT ILFORD NORTH'S SIZEABLE JEWISH COMMUNITY (ABOUT 11 PERCENT OF THE ELECTORATE) WAS ABANDONING THE TORIES BY PUBLICLY DECLARING THAT THE CURRENT IMMIGRANTS, UNLIKE PREVIOUS WAVES OF IMMIGRANTS, COULD NOT BE ASSIMILATED BY BRITISH SOCIETY, REACHED A NEW LOW FOR A MAJOR BRITISH POLITICAL FIGURE. IRONICALLY LABOR CANVASSERS REPORTED FEW SIGNS THAT THE PREDOMINATELY CONSERVATIVE "JEWISH VOTE" WAS SWINGING TO LABOR. DESPITE THE PUBLIC TONE OF THE CAMPAIGN, VERY FEW VOTERS SEEM WILLING TO RAISE IMMIGRATION OR RACE WHEN THEY ARE CANVASSED -- PRICES, THE ECONOMY, AND TAXES ARE TO BE THEIR ARTICULATED PREOCCUPATIONS.

-- LABOR VOTERS AND THE NF - LABOR CAMPAIGN WORKERS ARE DOEPLY DISQUIETED BY INDICATIONS THAT SIGNIFICANT NUMBERS OF THEIR TRADITIONAL SUPPORTERS ARE LEANING TOWARD THE NF. A SPECIAL EFFORT HAS BEEN MADE TO HAVE LIMITED OFFICIAL USE

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MPS, INCLUDING CABINET MEMBERS, REVISIT HOMES OF FORMER SUPPORTERS EXPRESSING A PREFERENCE FOR THE NF. IN ONE WARD, 25 SUCH INDIVIDUALS OR FAMILIES WERE REVISITED, WITH ONLY LIMITED SUCCESS. ONE RATHER LONG DISCUSSION WITH AN OFF-DUTY FIREMAN, WHO PLANNED TO SUPPORT THE NF, INDICATED THAT WHILE HE HAD LITTLE BRIEF FOR THE NF'S IDEAS OR POLICIES, A VOTE FOR THIS PARTY GAVE HIM A MEANS TO MANIFEST HIS DISSATISFACTION WITH BOTH MAJOR PARTIES. IN THIS CASE THE INDIVIDUAL FINALLY SAID HE WOULD PROBABLY VOTE LABOR, BUT OTHER CANVASSERS REPORTED A RELATIVELY HIGH LEVEL OF THIS "STICK IN THE EYE" ATTITUDE AMONG FORMER LABOR STALWARTS.

-- THE LIBERAL VOTE - ALTHOUGH ONE IN SIX ILFORD VOTERS SUPPORTED THE LIBERALS IN THE LAST GENERAL ELECTION, LABOR CANVASSERS REPORT GREAT DIFFICULTY IN FINDING ELECTORS WHO WOULD ADMIT TO HAVING DONE SO, AND EVEN FEWER WHO CURRENTLY LEAN TOWARD THE LIBERALS. THE PRESS AND OTHER SOURCES REPORT THAT THE LIBERAL CANDIDATE -- JOHN FREEMAN, A LOCAL SCHOOL MASTER -- HAS BEEN ENCOUNTERING SIMILAR DIFFICULTY IN UNCOVERING SUPPORTERS. WHAT HAPPENED TO THE FORMER LIBERALS? THE MOST PERSUASIVE THEORY IS THAT THE LIBERALS PREVIOUSLY ATTRACTED THE STICK-IN-THE-EVE VOTERS(THERE W NO OTHER OPTION IN THE GENERAL ELECTION), BUT THAT THE LIBERALS' PACT WITH THE GOVERNMENT HAS CAUSED SUCH VOTER TO SEEK OTHER ALTERNATIVES TO EXPRESS THEIR DISSATISFACTION WITH THE MAJOR PARTIES.

-- THE WOMEN'S VOTE AND MRS. THATCHER -- CONVENTIONAL WISDOM AND THE OPINION POLLS INDICATE THAT MRS. THATCHER DOES BETTER AMONG WOMEN VOTERS THAN MEN. OUR LIMITED OBSERVATIONS IN ILFORD NORTH -- A MIDDLE CLASS AREA WHERE HOME OWNERSHIP IS THE RULE AND COUNCIL HOUSING ESTATES A RARITY -- CALLS THIS INTO QUESTION. NEARLY LIMITED OFFICIAL USE

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A THIRD OF THE HOUSEHOLDS OBSERVED IN ONE CANVASS WERE POLITICALLY DIVIDED, WITH THE WIFE EXPRESSING AN INTENT TO VOTE LABOR. IN MOST CASES THE HUSBANDS EXPRESSED A PREFERENCE FOR THE TORY CANDIDATE, BUT THERE WERE A FEW NF SUPPORTERS. ALL WERE YOUNG FAMILIES WITH CHILDREN, AND SUCH FAMILIES ARE VERY COMMON IN ILFORD. WE ALSO OBSERVED A RELATIVELY LARGE NUMBER OF HOUSES DISPLAYING POSTERS FOR BOTH THE MAJOR CANDIDATES WHICH, ACCORDING TO LABOR PARTY SOURCES AND PREVIOUS EMBASSY OBSERVATION, IS MOST UNUSUAL.

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L-03 NSAE-00 NSC-05 PA-01 SP-02 SS-15 USIA-06
COME-00 EB-08 LAB-04 SIL-01 TRSE-00 HA-05 /079 W
-----077595 011857Z /42

P 011835Z MAR 78
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-- THE DISSIDENT FORMER TORY MP -- THERE WERE FEW
OUTWARD INDICATIONS THAT THE ENTRY OF FORMER MP TOM
IREMONGER AS AN INDEPENDENT CANDIDATE WILL DAMAGE
CONSERVATIVE CHANCES. INDEED, LABOR PARTY CAMPAIGN
MANAGERS WERE UNANIMOUS IN BELIEVING THAT IREMONGER
WOULD NOT MAKE A SIGNIFICANT DENT IN THE TORY VOTE.

4. OPINION POLLS AND MOST OBSERVERS BELIEVE THE
CONSERVATIVES WILL REGAIN THE ILFORD NORTH SEAT BY A
LARGE MARGIN. AN EARLY POLL GAVE THE TORIES AN 11-POINT
LEAD OVER LABOR, AND A FEBRUARY 25/26 GALLUP POLL
(RANDOM SAMPLE) GIVES THEM A 22-POINT LEAD. OUR LABOR
PARTY SOURCES TOO BELIEVE THEY WILL LOSE THE BY-ELECTION,
THOUGH THEY REPORT AN APPRECIABLE SHIFT IN VOTER SENTIMENT
IN THEIR FAVOR DURING THE PAST FOUR OR FIVE DAYS AND ARE
HOPEFUL THE OUTCOME WILL AT LEAST BE CLOSE. OUR GUESS
IS THAT THE CONSERVATIVES WILL INDEED WIN, BUT BY A
LESSER MARGIN THAN THE METHODOLOGICALLY SUSPECT GALLUP
POLL INDICATES. WE ANTICIPATE A MARGIN OF BETWEEN TWO
AND THREE THOUSAND VOTES, DEPENDING ON THE VOTER TURNOUT,
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WHICH WILL PROBABLY BE AROUND 60 PERCENT. BUT FACTORS SUCH AS THE DISTRIBUTION OF THE PREVIOUS VOTE, THE DRAWING POWER OF THE NF AND THE INFERRED IMPACT OF THE IMMIGRATION/RACE ISSUE ARE LIKELY TO HAVE MORE IMPORTANT IMPLICATIONS FOR THE ANTICIPATED GENERAL ELECTION LATER THIS YEAR. PSYCHOLOGISTS AND OTHER ANALYSTS SHOULD HAVE MUCH TO WEIGH AND SCRUTINIZE IN THE WAKE OF THE ILFORD NORTH BY-ELECTION.

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Message Attributes

Automatic Decaptoning: X
Capture Date: 01 jan 1994
Channel Indicators: n/a
Current Classification: UNCLASSIFIED
Concepts: PROVINCIAL ELECTIONS, ELECTION FORECASTS
Control Number: n/a
Copy: SINGLE
Draft Date: 01 mar 1978
Decaption Date: 01 jan 1960
Decaption Note:
Disposition Action: RELEASED
Disposition Approved on Date:
Disposition Case Number: n/a
Disposition Comment: 25 YEAR REVIEW
Disposition Date: 20 Mar 2014
Disposition Event:
Disposition History: n/a
Disposition Reason:
Disposition Remarks:
Document Number: 1978LONDON03374
Document Source: CORE
Document Unique ID: 00
Drafter: n/a
Enclosure: n/a
Executive Order: N/A
Errors: N/A
Expiration:
Film Number: D780094-0170
Format: TEL
From: LONDON
Handling Restrictions: n/a
Image Path:
ISecure: 1
Legacy Key: link1978/newtext/t197803120/aaaadxsy.tel
Line Count: 289
Litigation Code IDs:
Litigation Codes:
Litigation History:
Locator: TEXT ON-LINE, ON MICROFILM
Message ID: 44c7d1ba-c288-dd11-92da-001cc4696bcc
Office: ACTION EUR
Original Classification: LIMITED OFFICIAL USE
Original Handling Restrictions: n/a
Original Previous Classification: n/a
Original Previous Handling Restrictions: n/a
Page Count: 6
Previous Channel Indicators: n/a
Previous Classification: LIMITED OFFICIAL USE
Previous Handling Restrictions: n/a
Reference: 78 LONDON 2574
Retention: 0
Review Action: RELEASED, APPROVED
Review Content Flags:
Review Date: 05 may 2005
Review Event:
Review Exemptions: n/a
Review Media Identifier:
Review Release Date: N/A
Review Release Event: n/a
Review Transfer Date:
Review Withdrawn Fields: n/a
SAS ID: 3158517
Secure: OPEN
Status: NATIVE
Subject: ILFORD NORTH BY-ELECTION
TAGS: PINT, PGOV, UK
To: STATE
Type: TE
vdkvgwkey: odbc://SAS/SAS.dbo.SAS_Docs/44c7d1ba-c288-dd11-92da-001cc4696bcc
Review Markings:
Sheryl P. Walter
Declassified/Released
US Department of State
EO Systematic Review
20 Mar 2014
Markings: Sheryl P. Walter Declassified/Released US Department of State EO Systematic Review 20 Mar 2014